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Common Core 101: A primer to separate education fact from fiction

By Erin Richards
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After months of rhetoric about nationwide academic standards, it's time for a quick comprehension quiz.

■***Choose the statement that accurately describes the Common Core State Standards.***

a. They are voluntary. Forty-four states along with Wisconsin have agreed to implement a set of expectations for what students should be able to do in reading and math in each grade.

b. They are more rigorous than Wisconsin's previous academic expectations.

c. They have been in the works for years. They were adopted in 2010 in Wisconsin, and that was already 3 1/2 years after the state had begun the process of revising math and reading standards.

d. The curriculum and teaching methods used to help kids meet the new standards are decided by teachers and districts, with oversight from locally elected school boards.

■***Mark the following statements about the Common Core true or false.***

a. The Common Core includes sex education standards.

b. The Common Core would position schools to collect behavioral data from students, such as from retinal or fingerprint scans.

c. Business leaders support the standards because they want to maintain a steady supply of low-functioning workers to fill rote jobs.

d. The standards amount to a federal takeover of local education — even for private schools.

How many multiple choice statements did you circle? (They're all correct, actually.)

Did you mark any statements true? (They're all false.)

If Common Core generates confusion, or if you've heard something attributed to it that seems awry, you're not alone.

The academic standards were adopted by most states four years ago with little fanfare, but have generated massive public discussion of late. That's largely because the standards have a drawn-out history and their implications on kids and teachers are complex and far-reaching.

In addition, legislation driven predominantly by concerned conservative lawmakers could halt the implementation of the standards in schools. A bill that would do just that in Wisconsin is due to draw fiery debate Thursday in Madison.

So how did we get here?

The idea behind common standards seemed simple enough: Address the uneven academic expectations from state-to-state by shifting all levels of K-12 American schooling to become more rigorous.

Over the course of their education, students would think more critically at earlier ages. They would be better prepared to pursue college or career training, and better equipped to compete globally with their peers from other countries.

On a practical level, that would mean something as simple as learning how to tell time in second grade instead of third grade, or being able to write compellingly about the circumstances that led to the French Revolution instead of rattling off dates and names.

It would also mean that if students in Wyoming moved to Wisconsin, they would not encounter a wild swing in the baseline knowledge and skills expected of them.

"The standards are a floor, not a ceiling," said Henry Kranendonk, a retired Milwaukee Public Schools math specialist and a respected voice nationally on curriculum development.

"From the floor, will there be kids who can go beyond that? Of course. We hope they will," Kranendonk said. "But we also hope to provide a baseline for what all kids should be able to grapple with and learn at each stage of their education."

Different sides

Turning theory into a workable reality has gotten messy and, as with so many things today, political.

At one end — in Wisconsin and most other states — is a vocal core of opponents, many of whom identify themselves as tea party Republicans, who often inaccurately describe the realities of the standards.

At the other end are strongly supportive state education departments, which quietly — some would say too quietly — worked on the standards for years without trumpeting the major

changes that schools, teachers, kids and families would face.

In the vast middle are teachers, parents, and community members, many of whom support the idea of higher standards, but who are concerned with how this being rolled out.

For teachers, there is the additional discomfort of knowing that how students perform on new state exams aligned to the new standards ultimately will be used to judge their school's performance — and the quality of their own classroom instruction.

Finally, there is one last group off to the side — and it's a large one: Those people who know little to nothing about the standards and their implications. They may not understand why their local school board or community is hosting meetings about academic standards. And they may be easily swayed by claims that are not entirely accurate.

Beyond 'No Child'

The push for common standards aimed to address a major problem under the No Child Left Behind law from 2001, which ushered in the era of standards-based testing of students.

Under that law, states were allowed to determine their own bar for proficiency on state standardized achievement tests. Some states set the bar high. Others, like Wisconsin, set the bar low.

A respected national test given to a sample of students in each state revealed these discrepancies. Most students in Wisconsin looked proficient on the state test, but were middling on the national exam.

Then there's the international picture. American student performance on a respected international exam given to 15-year-olds has remained mostly flat in core subject for years, while teens in other developed countries are making big gains — especially in math and science.

Many developed countries have a national curriculum designed to make sure students learn the same material no matter where they live. That concept has been anathema to Americans, a nation that cherishes individuality, creativity and a public education system that has local control.

But some leaders still wondered whether there was a way the U.S. could push its education system forward, while still honoring ideals of innovation and local decision-making.

"Is there really anything we can really agree on for what our kids should know, and what they should be held accountable for, when looking at education?" Karendonk, the respected math curriculum expert, asked.

A bipartisan group of state school superintendents and state governors said yes. The idea from

these leaders was to initiate the development of standards that states could voluntarily adopt.

In 2009, Wisconsin and 48 other states and territories signed a non-binding commitment to initiate the development of common standards. Wisconsin had already begun revising its reading and math standards in 2007, but the state Department of Public Instruction saw the national effort as aligning with its own goals.

The Common Core Standards in math and English were completed in 2010, and were eventually adopted by 45 states, Washington, D.C., four territories and the Department of Defense schools.

Common Core holdouts to date include Texas, Alaska, Nebraska and Virginia. Minnesota agreed to implement the English, but not the math standards.

Most states also signed onto one of two consortia to design new state achievement exams aligned to the standards.

Because of the major effort it takes to design and vet such tests, the groups received funding from the federal government. Wisconsin joined a group called the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium; others joined the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

Who wrote the standards?

Representatives from education reform groups such as Achieve and the consultant group Student Achievement Partners participated in writing or working on the Common Core standards, which were vetted and revised at the state level.

In Wisconsin, teams of education professionals reviewed multiple drafts of the standards and provided feedback to the lead authors.

Those teams included representatives from entities such as the Wisconsin State Reading Association, the Wisconsin Mathematics Council, the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, the University of Wisconsin System, tech college system and private college system. Teachers and principals were tapped for their expertise through local professional organizations.

UW-Madison leaders and the president of Gateway Technical College provided feedback from the state at the national level.

As one example, Bill Sparks, a UW-Eau Claire emeritus professor of mathematics, told state Sen. Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee) in a letter that he and a team of math educators reviewed about eight drafts of the standards. Farrow has become one of the leading critics in Wisconsin of the Common Core standards.

But the dry topic of academic standards has never elicited much interest from those outside

education circles.

Until about a year ago.

What are some concerns?

Criticism has come from different directions.

Tea party Republicans say the standards tramp on individual freedom. Other critics are opposed to what they see as a "one size fits all" approach to education. Gov. Scott Walker says the state needs to create Wisconsin-specific standards.

There is also a sense that the federal government bribed states to adopt the new standards and the new common assessments aligned to them. The Obama administration did indeed give incentives to states to adopt the Common Core — as well as other reforms such as charter school expansions and more uniform teacher evaluations — as part of its Race to the Top education grant competition, which started in 2009. But states were not mandated to adopt the standards, or apply for a Race to the Top grant.

As for teachers, many do support the standards. But some worry that the Common Core is being implemented too fast and without proper resources.

Because the standards call for certain content to be taught at earlier grades, assessments tied to the standards may test some students on material they haven't learned yet — especially if they're already working behind grade level. In many cases, textbooks genuinely aligned to the Common Core have not been written yet.

And teachers — and parents, for that matter — are routinely concerned about testing time overtaking quality instructional time. With higher standards, it's almost a sure bet that test scores will drop — even for students in respected suburban districts with high ACT test scores and college placement rates.

Expectations at each level

The standards are not breezy reading, because they outline specific concepts students should know and be able to do in different categories, at each grade level.

The bottom line is that most teachers must teach harder material — or change their delivery of material — to get students to meet the new standards. They also may change the way teachers grade, to emphasize mastery of the material instead of say, awarding points based on whether students turn in an assignment on time.

So what do the standards ask children to do?

In math, kindergartners should be able to fluently add and subtract between 0 and 5.

In second grade, they should be able to use addition and subtraction between 0 and 100 to solve word problems involving lengths.

Wisconsin's previous academic standards didn't say anything about what students in these grades should learn. The old state standards outlined only what students in 4th, 8th and 12th grade should know.

Under the Common Core in English, third-grade students should know how to distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or other characters.

Seventh graders should be able to write several pieces of evidence to support analysis of what a text says.

In high school, the Common Core says students taking algebra should know how to create equations and inequalities in one variable and use them to solve problems. Students in geometry should know how to figure out the equation of a circle and its radius by using thePythagoreum theorem.

The standards also call for more attention to informational texts and nonfiction in high school English. Students should be able to understand literary nonfiction, they should be able to analyze the reasoning used in seminal U.S. documents, such as U.S. Supreme Court decisions or presidential addresses.

Erroneous claims

Some claims regarding the Common Core are simply untrue.

Websites around the country with monikers like Stop Common Core Illinois perpetuate claims that the academic standards include guidelines for sex education. The link provided goes to a set of recommended standards developed by health groups that have no affiliation with the Common Core movement.

Another claim that the Common Core could lead to an alarming set of tests on students involving retinal scans is also untrue.

That claim came from a report on a U.S. Department of Education website that highlighted the work of researchers gathering data to explore the challenges children face as they undertake mental tasks. But the report had nothing to do with the implementation of the Common Core.

Adding another layer of confusion to the Common Core debate is that the controversy over the standards erupted in 2013, instead of when most states adopted the standards around 2010.

Andy Smarick, a Republican who is also a national voice in education matters at the nonprofit Bellwether Education Partners, said the idea of heightened standards wasn't terribly controversial until the price of all the things tied to them — new exams, new textbooks, school

report cards — started becoming more clear.

Now, all those things are becoming reality — and forcing the conversation of how each state wants to educate it's young.

When you agree to common standards and common assessments, there's no way to spin your state's performance to look better than it really is, Smarick said last year when the subject was heating up.

"You can't ease up on (individual state) tests, and lower definitions of proficiency," Smarick said.

"If your students wind up in the bottom third on this new common test, you have no excuses and no recourse."

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